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Social Distance toward Syrian Refugees: The Role of Intergroup Anxiety in Facilitating Positive Relations

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The number of asylum seekers and refugees across the world is rapidly increasing. Negative attitudes toward these groups are globally prevalent and typically hostile because most receiving country citizens perceive them to be a security threat and an economic burden. This paper aims to understand the antecedents of negative attitudes toward a large refugee group currently garnering a great deal of attention—Syrian refugees, and experimentally test ways to ameliorate negative attitudes. In Study 1 ($N = 122$), we investigated predictors of social distance—as a proxy for prejudice—and found right-wing authoritarianism and intergroup anxiety to be significant predictors. In Study 2 ($N = 162$), we tested whether perceived acculturation orientation would predict social distance and found that Americans were less prejudiced toward Syrians who preferred to assimilate rather than integrate. Finally, in Study 3 ($N = 153$), we tested if a form of vicarious contact could reduce social distance via reduced intergroup anxiety; we found initial evidence for this mediation link. We discussed the potential for the vicarious contact intervention to foster positive intergroup relations and contribute to refugee wellbeing.

Global increases in the prevalence of forced displacement have resulted in increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees across the world. This global increase was recently reported to be the highest figure in recorded history (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). One major contributor to the global “refugee crisis” has been the refugees who have been displaced from Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. Despite the relatively

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small number of resettlements in Western countries, traditional media often promote negative representations of immigrants and refugees (e.g., Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013), and negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees are globally prevalent and typically hostile (e.g., Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018). Anecdotal evidence from mainstream media has shown that citizens of most countries are not welcoming of Syrian refugees since they are thought to be both an economic burden and a threat to national security (Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016), although there are exceptions to this, for instance in Canada, where government-sanctioned pro-refugee ideology was found to increase migrant positivity over time (Gaucher, Friesen, Neufeld, & Esses, 2018). Although finding durable solutions for refugees is of utmost importance, we believe improving attitudes toward refugees is equally crucial for both positive intergroup relations and refugee wellbeing. Accordingly, we aimed to understand predictors of prejudice toward Syrian refugees with the intention of using this knowledge to inform prejudice-reduction interventions.

First, we conceptualized prejudice in the form of social distance (Bogardus, 1967) referring to “feelings of unwillingness among members of a group to accept or approve a given degree of intimacy in interaction with a member of an outgroup” (Williams, 1964, p. 29). This subsequently determined the choice of the independent variable in our first two studies and the nature of the intervention tested in the third study, as social distance is a more interactional aspect of prejudice. Specifically, first we explored the predictors of prejudice toward Syrian refugees focusing on theoretically relevant predictors driven from other similar work (Study 1). Next, we tested the role of perceived acculturation orientations of the refugees in terms of how this would affect members of the receiving community’s social distance toward refugees (Study 2). Finally, we tested a vicarious contact intervention (a story reading intervention similar to Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Vezzali, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2011) to reduce social distance through reduced intergroup anxiety (Study 3) as intergroup anxiety is one of the established mediators between contact and prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Background to the “Syrian Refugee Crisis”

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the number of internally and externally displaced Syrians has rapidly increased. According to the latest figures by the UNHCR (2018), over 5.5 million people fled Syria, and around six million are internally displaced with almost half of them living in besieged areas. The highest number of Syrian refugees is hosted in neighboring countries with about 3.4 million in Turkey and another two million across Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Most of these refugees experience very poor living conditions in these five countries, and they try to reach Europe to seek safety, protection, and stability. However, in the absence of regular migration pathways, Syrians rely on people smugglers to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

For example, in 2016, over 5,000 individuals were reported dead or missing among some 362,000 externally displaced people who attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea. European countries received over one million applications for asylum from Syrians since 2011, 63% of which were received by Germany and Sweden alone. Although Europe is close and financially capable (relative to the five countries doing the majority of the refugee hosting), only a very small portion of refugees are being accepted, and the bulk of this by a minority of countries.

Despite very small number of refugee resettlements in the United States (7% of its fair share), traditional media channels continue to promote the idea that there is a big Syrian refugee influx into the United States, and these refugees constitute a security threat to the public. According to the Bloomberg Politics national poll conducted in November 2015, 53% of Americans were opposed to admitting Syrian refugees into the country (69% of these identified as Republican). Only 28% of Americans supported the idea that Syrians should be admitted into the country regardless of their religion, and another 11% indicated that only Christian Syrians should be allowed to resettle. These polls were given large media coverage on TV and were discussed in terms of American citizens' concerns about security threat rather than religious or ethnicity-based discrimination. Similar negative attitudes were previously identified in the political and media discourse surrounding refugees and asylum seekers in Australia (Every & Augoustinos, 2007; Gale, 2004). Accordingly, in this paper, we first wanted to understand the predictors of prejudice toward Syrian refugees in a country where most of the exposure is highly rooted in traditional media representations and political debates rather than people's own encounters with Syrian refugees in their daily lives. We also wanted to test a prejudice reduction intervention that might reduce social distance toward Syrian refugees, which may indirectly prepare receiving communities for contact and interaction.

Overview of the Present Research and Studies

This article presents a series of correlational and experimental studies that investigate prejudice toward Syrian refugees in the United States. First, using relevant predictors from the intergroup relations literature, our main aim is to develop an understanding of the antecedents of prejudice toward this particular group so that we can develop interventions to tackle it.

In Study 1, we investigated the predictors of social distance toward Syrian refugees in the United States by including a number of variables driven from research exploring negative attitudes toward migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. In Study 2, we investigated two questions. First, based on previous research, which suggests that an integration orientation sometimes fosters positive intergroup relations (Pfafferott, & Brown, 2006; Zagefka & Brown, 2002), we tested whether social distance toward these refugees varied depending on how we

presented their preferred way to acculturate into the American lifestyle (integrate vs. assimilate). Second, we tested whether presenting Syrians as humanitarian refugees vs. economic migrants would have an effect on social distance. Finally, in Study 3, focusing on a significant predictor from Study 1, we tested a vicarious contact intervention to reduce social distance through reduced intergroup anxiety. As contact improves intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), we tested a story-reading intervention as a form of positive media representation as opposed to the prevalent negative media representations.

Study 1

This study explores the predictors of social distance toward Syrian refugees in the United States. Based on the broader literature on (non-Syrian) refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, we tested the role of certain demographic variables such as age and gender, followed by a set of prejudice-relevant variables such as political orientation, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), social dominance orientation (SDO), national identification, religiosity, and intergroup anxiety.

Pedersen, Atwell, and Heveli (2005) identified age, gender, educational level, political orientation, and national identification as significant predictors of Australians' attitudes toward asylum seekers (see also Anderson, 2018a). Specifically, explicit negative attitudes were predicted by being older, being male, being politically conservative, and having higher levels of national identification. Religion has also been linked to increases in prejudice against asylum seekers (Anderson, 2018b; Perry, Paradies, & Pedersen, 2015). Other research also showed that national identification predicted blatant and subtle forms of prejudice toward foreigners in European countries (Mummendy, Klink, & Brown, 2001; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), negative attitudes toward immigrants in both Canada and Australia through threat perceptions and dehumanizing beliefs (Louis, Esses, & Lalonde, 2013), and more negative and less positive behavioral intentions toward Syrian refugees in Turkey especially when threat was high (Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018).

Moreover, research exploring the predictors of social attitudes often uses Duckitt and Sibley's (2017) dual process model (DPM) of prejudice. This model proposes that there are two distinct ideological attitude dimensions, namely RWA and SDO, and prejudice is driven through these attitude dimensions (motivational process) by perceptions of threat and competition, respectively. RWA is the social cultural aspect of this model, comprising adherence to traditional social norms, aggression toward deviants from these norms, and a preference for authorities to impose discipline (Altemeyer, 1981). Individuals high in RWA tend to perceive the world as a dangerous place, and are motivated to preserve social cohesion, stability, order, and tradition as opposed to personal freedom, individual autonomy, and self-expression. Conversely, SDO represents the

economic-hierarchical conservatism dimension of this model including preference for hierarchy, group-based power, superiority, and inequality over egalitarianism and humanitarianism (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Individuals high in SDO tend to perceive the world as a competitive jungle, and are motivated to preserve the status quo within the hierarchy (Duckitt & Sibley, 2017). A good amount of research has established the DPM to be useful in understanding outgroup attitudes (Duckitt & Sibley, 2017), and a body of evidence has applied this model to understand attitudes toward asylum seekers (Anderson, Stuart, & Rossen, 2015; Lyall & Thorsteinsson, 2007; Nickerson & Louis, 2008).

Along with demographic and ideological variables, affective experiences should also be investigated while studying intergroup relations. Previous work has suggested that intergroup anxiety (i.e., the experience of being personally threatened while interacting with an outgroup member) might be useful in understanding success or failure of the positive intergroup relations (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). In a meta-analysis of 95 studies looking at intergroup threat, intergroup anxiety was found to be the strongest predictor of outgroup attitudes (Riek, Mania, & Gaerner, 2006). Since we have chosen social distance as our outcome variable, we thought a more interactional aspect of threat, namely intergroup anxiety, could also be relevant for this study. Overall, based on the literature reviewed above, we predicted that negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees would be related to being male and older, and having higher levels of political conservatism, religiosity, national identification, RWA, SDO, and to intergroup anxiety.

Method

Participants and procedure. The sample comprised 122 U.S. American MTurk participants (age range: 18–69 years, $M = 37.24$, $SD = 12.35$; females = 65), who were paid USD\$1 in exchange for their time (33 MTurk workers who participated in the study from other countries were excluded). All the measures were endorsed on seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the construct. Both the scales and items within scales were randomly presented. We also ran a post hoc power analysis after the data collection was finished; the observed power was 1 with a critical p -value of .05.

Measures.

Social distance. We adapted the social distance scale (Bogardus, 1967) to use as a six-item Likert-type scale as a means to measure prejudice. This measure asks participants to what extent they would have Syrians as regular friends, would work beside in an office, would have them in their neighborhood, would speak to them as acquaintances, would marry them, or would exclude them from their

country (reversed). An exploratory factor analysis yielded single factor solution explaining 68% of the variance, and we used this factor as our dependent variable. Reliability was acceptable; $\alpha = .91$.

Political orientation. We asked participants to indicate to their political orientation ranging from completely conservative to completely progressive on a seven-point scale.

Social dominance orientation. We used the 16-item version of the SDO scale (Pratto et al., 1994). An example item is: "It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom." Reliability was acceptable; $\alpha = .94$.

Right-wing authoritarianism. We used the 13-item version of the RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1981). An example item is: "What our country really needs instead of more 'civil rights' is a good stiff dose of law and order." Reliability was acceptable; $\alpha = .92$.

National identification. We used a modified five-item version of the items used by Pedersen and colleagues (2005) to assess national identification. An example item is: "I have a lot in common with the average citizen of the United States." Reliability was acceptable; $\alpha = .83$.

Religiosity. We used 12 items of the Theistic Conviction Scale to measure religiosity (Anderson, Koc, & Kaufmann, 2015). An example item is: "What happens to me in life is preordained by a higher power." Reliability was acceptable; $\alpha = .90$.

Intergroup anxiety. We adapted Stephan and Stephan's (1985) intergroup anxiety scale using six items (i.e., anxious, worried, tense, apprehensive, awkward, and nervous) and asked participants to what extent they would feel those emotions when interacting with Syrian refugees in the United States. Reliability was acceptable; $\alpha = .93$.

Results

The zero-order correlations are presented in Table 1. To test significant predictors of social distance, we entered demographic variables (age, gender, and political orientation) in the first step of a multiple regression analysis, and then we entered the prejudice-relevant predictors of RWA, SDO, national identification, religiosity, and intergroup anxiety in the second step. The first step of the regression model was significant, $F(3,117) = 7.85, p < .001$, with a medium effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.20$)—political orientation was the only significant predictor variable in this model (see Table 2). The final regression model was also significant, $F(8,112) = 18.48, p < .001$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = 1.32$). In the final model, the significant predictors of social distance were RWA, intergroup anxiety, and religiosity (see Table 2), accounting for 57% of the variance.

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations among the Variables in Study 1

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age	.00	.12	-.02	-.20*	.11	.19*	-.07	-.05
2 Gender		-.20*	-.13	-.09	-.08	-.10	-.02	-.05
3 Political orientation			-.64***	-.43***	-.37***	-.33***	-.24**	-.39***
4 RWA				.57***	.48***	.50***	.46***	.63***
5 SDO					.22*	-.01	.52***	.56***
6 National identification						.34***	.31***	.31***
7 Religiosity							.17	.15
8 Intergroup anxiety								.62***
9 Social distance								

Note: RWA, right-wing authoritarianism; SDO, social dominance orientation (* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$).

Table 2. Unstandardized (B) and Standardized (β) Regression Coefficients, and Semipartial Correlations (sr) for Predictors in Regression Models Predicting Social Distance toward Refugees

	B [95% CI]	SE B	Beta	sr
Step 1				
Age	-0.00 [-0.00, 0.00]	0.00	-0.09	-.08
Gender	-0.03 [-0.05, 0.10]	0.04	-0.06	-.06
Political orientation	-0.06 [-0.08, -0.03]	0.01	-0.39	-.38
Step 2				
Age	0.00 [-0.00, 0.00]	0.00	0.05	.04
Gender	-0.03 [-0.04, 0.09]	0.03	-0.05	-.05
Political orientation	-0.00 [-0.02, 0.02]	0.01	-0.00	-.01
RWA	0.09 [0.05, 0.13]	0.02	0.51	.29
SDO	0.01 [-0.02, 0.05]	0.02	0.07	.04
National identification	0.00 [-0.03, 0.03]	0.01	-0.01	-.01
Religiosity	-0.03 [-0.05 , 0.00]	0.01	-0.18	-.14
Intergroup anxiety	0.06 [0.03, 0.08]	0.01	0.38	.31

Note: Significant coefficients presented in boldface (all $ps < .001$; except for religiosity, $p = .031$). Dummy-coded variable: gender (0 = female, 1 = male). Constants for Step 1 = 0.63 ($SE = 0.10$); for Step 2 = -0.04 ($SE = 0.13$). RWA, right-wing authoritarianism; SDO, social dominance orientation.

Discussion

When all predictors were taken into account, RWA, intergroup anxiety, and religiosity were the only significant predictors of social distance toward Syrian refugees. SDO and national identification were surprisingly unrelated to social

distance when the other variables were taken into account despite their significant zero-order correlations with social distance. Although the media presents Syrian refugees as a security threat as well as economic burden to the receiving countries (Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016), these findings suggest that, in the current context, negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees are driven more by perceptions that they are dangerous than that they are competitive. This seems contradictory with much previous evidence presenting SDO as an important predictor of negative attitudes toward refugees and migrants, and policies for them (e.g., Esses, Veenliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008; Scott & Safdar, 2017). We believe this could also be related to our dependent variable—social distance—and its interactional nature. Although SDO might drive negative attitudes, tendencies to dehumanize, and lack of support for policy for refugees, RWA might drive people's tendency to avoid interaction with refugees.

We found the strongest predictor to be intergroup anxiety. This is not surprising given the nature of our dependent variable. Participants' projected feelings toward how they might feel while interacting with a refugee predicted their likelihood to avoid them. Finally, it should also be noted that this study only tested the measured variables, and whether they predicted social distance. Other aspects of threat (e.g., symbolic and realistic; Stephan & Stephan, 2013) could also be related to social distance and should be investigated in further research.

Overall, in this study, we explored which of the relevant variables from the prejudice literature would be related to social distance toward Syrian refugees. In the next study, we focused on a different area to predict prejudice: the perceived acculturation orientations of refugees.

Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to investigate if perceptions of acculturation orientations would change social distance toward Syrian refugees. The rationale is that social distance toward any migrant might be related to the assumptions by members of the receiving population for what is the "best" way for the migrant to relate to their receiving culture (Zick, Wagner, van Dick, & Petzel, 2001). As such, receiving expectations that align with the foreigner's desired or performed acculturation orientation should be related to less social distance (for instance, see *Interactive Acculturation Model*; Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997).

In the context of acculturation orientations (Berry, 2001), we chose to focus on two orientations, namely assimilation and integration. A receiving community member's preference for an assimilation orientation would expect Syrians to give up their own culture and completely adopt the receiving culture. On the other hand, a receiving community member's preference for an integration orientation would expect Syrians to retain their culture while simultaneously adapting to American culture. Previous research shows that majority group members often desire for

minority group members to assimilate or integrate into their societies (rather than separate or marginalize), and this varies as a function of how prejudiced the majority group members are (Horenczyk, 1996; Koscic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2005; Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998). For instance, Koscic et al. (2005) found that Italians with stronger prejudice wanted immigrants to assimilate, whereas people with lower levels of prejudice wanted immigrants to integrate. On the other hand, in a study where Pakistani minority members indicated their cultural preferences, British participants favored integration more when it was in line with the minority preference; however, this was also moderated by the level of prejudice such that participants preferred integration when prejudice was low (Zagefka, Tip, Gonzalez, Brown, & Cinnirella, 2012). Accordingly, we conceptualized this relation from the opposite direction and tested whether learning about Syrian refugees' preferred acculturation type would affect American's attitudes toward them, because much political and media discourse around refugees promotes the idea that refugees cannot fit into American society, and their cultural heritage corrupts American culture and values (Ogan, Pennington, Venger, & Metz, 2018). Therefore, it could be expected that Americans would be less prejudiced when they know Syrian prefer to leave their cultural heritage behind and fully adopt American culture.

Moreover, although acculturation orientations such as integration are commonly used in daily discourse, the meaning and expectations regarding these orientations are vague and interpreted differently by different groups (Martiniello, 2006). For instance, recent research shows that receiving country nationals' views on integration might be quite similar to what assimilation stands for in Berry's terms (Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2016). In a study with Belgian-descent teachers and ethnic minority students at secondary schools, Van Praag et al. (2016) found that, for both groups, the definition of integration involves intercultural contact; however, the teachers want ethnic minority groups to give up certain cultural practices, which might then result in resistance by some students. Therefore, in the current study, we provided participants with the definitions of these orientations, and expected that social distance would be higher if Syrian refugees' preferred acculturation orientation was described as integration as opposed to assimilation.

Finally, we varied the type of migration attributed to Syrian migrants to explore if this status (humanitarian refugee vs. economic migrant) would to reduce/increase social distance. The underlying rationale was that presenting Syrians as humanitarian refugees might attenuate the feelings of threat and competitiveness that might otherwise be present, which is known to predict prejudice (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2017). We expected that presenting Syrians as humanitarian refugees (e.g., those who flee danger in their own countries) might lead to more favorable attitudes as opposed to economic migrants (e.g., who chose to migrate to the United States for economic purposes). Accordingly, we tested whether

Syrians' acculturation orientation (integration vs. assimilation) and type of migration (refugees vs. economic) would affect social distance toward them.

Method

Participants and procedure. The sample comprised 162 U.S. American MTurk participants (age range: 18–70 years, $M = 35.38$, $SD = 11.33$; females = 96), who were paid USD\$1 (22 MTurk workers who participated in the study from other countries were excluded). Participants first completed a priori determined control measures (i.e., RWA and intergroup anxiety) as they were strongly related to social distance in Study 1, and we expected that including these variables might boost the power and increase precision of the experimental effect (Wang, Sparks, Gonzales, Hess, & Ledgerwood, 2017). We then used a 2×2 between-participants design to experimentally manipulate acculturation orientation and migrant type. Across these four conditions, we presented randomly assigned participants with findings from a bogus survey that ostensibly revealed the acculturation orientation (2: integration and assimilation) of the migrant (2: refugee and economic). Finally, we measured social distance toward Syrians. We also ran a post hoc power analysis after the data collection was finished; the observed power was .67, with a critical p -value of .05 for the significant main effect.

Experimental manipulation. We asked participants to read excerpts presenting bogus survey findings conducted with Syrians in the United States. The excerpts stated that 80% of Syrians in the United States (either refugee or economic migrant) prefer a certain acculturation orientation (either integration or assimilation). We also provided descriptions of these orientations below:

Integrate: Keep their home customs and at the same time adopt American customs—that is, speak both their own language and English, eat food, that is, Syrian but also typically American foods, and try to have a mix of friends and colleagues that are both Syrian and American.

Assimilate: Adopt American culture at the expense of their home culture—that is, they should only speak English, stop preparing Syrian dishes and partaking in Syrians festivals, and have as many American friends as they can.

Measures.

We measured RWA ($\alpha = .93$), intergroup anxiety ($\alpha = .94$), and social distance ($\alpha = .88$) using the same measures described as in Study 1.

Results

We ran a 2×2 between-subjects factorial ANOVA controlling for the significant predictors of social distance identified in Study 1 (i.e., RWA and intergroup

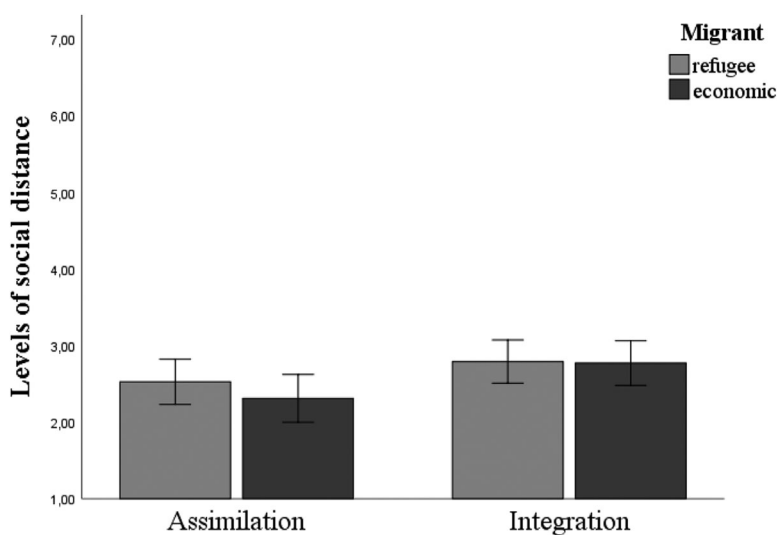


Fig. 1. Estimated marginal means of social distance scores across conditions.

anxiety). We found a significant main effect of acculturation orientation; regardless of the target's migrant type, participants reported less social distance toward assimilated Syrians than integrated Syrians; $F(1,155) = 5.82, p = .017, \eta_p^2 = .04$. More specifically, Americans reported less social distance when they perceive that Syrians are adopting American culture while rejecting their Syrian culture ($M = 2.42; SE = 0.11; 95\% CI = 2.21, 2.63$) rather than when they perceive that Syrians are also retaining their own culture ($M = 2.78; SE = 0.10; 95\% CI = 2.58, 2.98$). The main effect of migrant type was not significant $F(1,155) = 0.619, p = .433$, nor was its interaction with acculturation orientation $F(1,155) = 0.43, p = .511$. RWA and intergroup anxiety were also significant covariates, RWA: $F(1,155) = 33.33, p < .001$; intergroup anxiety: $F(1,155) = 24.22, p < .001$ (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Unlike previous studies that used prejudice as a moderator or a predictor in the context of acculturation (e.g., Kosic et al., 2005; Zagefka et al., 2012), we conceptualized a different causal link testing whether perceived acculturation orientation would affect prejudice. We found that perceived assimilation orientation would decrease social distance as compared to integration orientation. Although there are differences in acculturation preferences of immigrants and refugees across countries and our data come from the United States, it is important to bear in mind that integration is the key word for immigration and refugee policies for

most governments in Europe and in Canada (UNHCR, 2013). In addition, most of the controversial debate about refugees promotes the idea that they would not fit into their new receiving cultures (Ogan et al., 2018). However, our findings brought some evidence that it is not only the desire to fit in (which is represented by both integration and assimilation), but also giving up one's own culture that affects attitudes toward refugees. However, it could be difficult to promote an assimilation orientation amongst immigrants so as to foster positive intergroup relations because assimilation would also be costly for the migrants in terms of losing their ties to their cultural heritage (Berry, 2005). Therefore, a potential discrepancy between the public's perceptions and that of governments regarding the best means of acculturation should not be ignored when policies are developed and promoted.

We did not find any effects of migrant type on social distance. Initially, we had assumed that presenting Syrians as humanitarian refugees might attenuate the feelings of competitiveness that might otherwise be present in the context of economic migrants; however, this did not work. Similar findings were also obtained in Australian and U.S. samples in relation to economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Abeywickrama, Laham, & Crone, 2018). However, there is no evidence that the participants believed in the content of the manipulation. In the context of the refugee crisis regarding Syrians, it is unlikely that Syrians would be perceived as economic migrants. This remains as the main limitation of our study.

So far, we focused on well-known predictors of prejudice and the role of acculturation orientations on predicting social distance toward Syrian refugees. In the next study, we propose an intervention focusing on intergroup anxiety to reduce social distance indirectly.

Study 3

The aim of Study 3 was to develop an effective intervention to reduce social distance toward Syrian refugees by focusing on intergroup anxiety (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Previous research found that extended and vicarious contact reduces intergroup anxiety, which, in turn, promotes more positive outgroup attitudes (see Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014, for a review). This study used a vicarious contact intervention—contact through story reading from online social media—to reduce anxiety, and thus indirectly reduce social distance.

As postulated by Allport (1954), one of the most promising ways to promote positive intergroup relations is to foster intergroup contact. When there is contact between members of different groups, this predicts reduced prejudice and more favorable intergroup attitudes (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Moreover, this well-established relation is not only limited to direct contact. Other research has used extended (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Rope,

1997), imagined (Crisp & Turner, 2009), and vicarious forms of contact (Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006; Vezzali et al., 2014). Specifically, Cameron et al. (2006) used a story reading method for children, and found that outgroup attitudes toward refugees were significantly more positive in the extended contact conditions, where there was no direct contact between the participants and the outgroup, and they read a story about an ingroup member interacting with an outgroup member.

Vezzali et al. (2014) suggest that one of the mechanisms that accounts for the improvement in positive intergroup outcomes could be reduced intergroup anxiety, and Paolini and colleagues brought the first empirical evidence for this in the context of indirect cross-group friends in Northern Ireland (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004). Accordingly, we tested the effect of a story reading intervention on intergroup anxiety and indirectly social distance. We hypothesized that reading the story would foster vicarious contact, and thus reduce social distance via reduced intergroup anxiety.

Method

Participants and procedure. The sample comprised 153 U.S. American MTurk participants¹ (age range: 20–71 years, $M = 33.88$, $SD = 11.44$; females = 67), who were paid USD\$1 in exchange for their time in completing the survey. We randomly assigned participants to an experimental condition or a control condition before completing measures of intergroup anxiety and social distance. We also ran a post hoc power analysis; the achieved power was .95, with a critical p -value of 0.5 for the significant main effect of the experimental manipulation on the mediator.

Experimental manipulation. In the experimental condition, we asked participants to read a story about two boys resettling in Florida from Syria, which was taken from the Humans of New York website (Syrian Americans series).² The story contained pictures of the two boys, highlighted quotes, and some details about their prewar life, how they were affected when the war started, how they escaped to Turkey, and finally how they were to resettle in the United States. In the control condition, participants only responded to the outcome measures.

Measures. The measures of intergroup anxiety ($\alpha = .96$) and social distance ($\alpha = .86$) were the same as in Studies 1 and 2.

¹For this study, we initially had a small sample ($N = 89$) due to an administrative problem while launching the study. Therefore, we did another round of data collection to attain enough power. We control for this sampling issue in our analysis, and it did not affect our initial findings.

²The story used in Study 3 is titled as “We turned our trash can into a dinosaur.” The stories can be accessed on the following link: <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/tagged/syrian-americans>

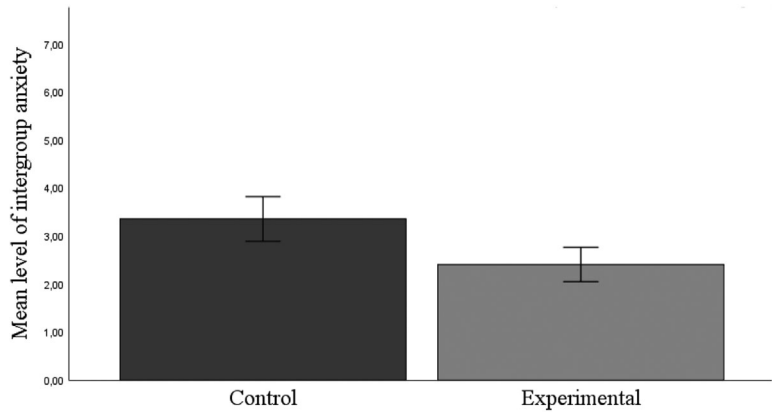


Fig. 2. Mean levels of intergroup anxiety scores across conditions.

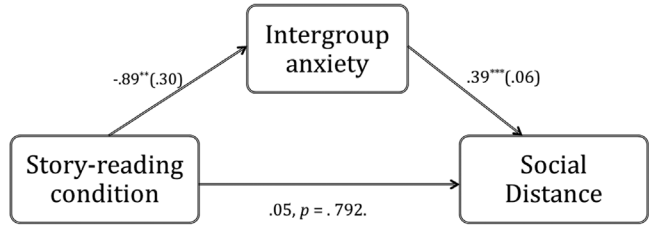


Fig. 3. Mediation model testing the effect of story reading on intergroup anxiety and social distance. Unstandardized estimates are presented on the figure with standard errors in the brackets (* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$)

Results

We ran an independent samples *t*-test with condition as the independent variable, and intergroup anxiety as the dependent variable, and found a main effect of condition; $t(151) = 3.25, p = .001$, Cohen’s $d = .53$; the vicarious contact induction significantly decreased intergroup anxiety (see Figure 2). To test our main hypothesis, we also ran a mediation analysis, and found that vicarious contact decreased anxiety ($b = -0.89, p = .003$), which then predicted lower levels of social distance ($b = 0.39, p < .001$). More importantly, the bootstrapped indirect effect was significant (standardized indirect effect: -0.13 ; bootstrap with 5,000 resamples, BCa CI = -0.22 to -0.05 ; see figure 3).³ Overall, 8% of the

³Since we collected data twice for this study and merged these datasets, we controlled for this by adding a dummy coded variable (as 0 = new, 1 = old sample) in the model. This variable was not

variance in intergroup anxiety and 28% of the variance in social distance were explained by the model.

Discussion

The results supported the previous evidence in the literature that vicarious contact is effective at reducing prejudice (Cameron et al., 2006; Vezzali et al., 2014), and this relation is mediated by reduced intergroup anxiety (Paolini et al., 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In the absence of many opportunities for direct contact between groups (like in the case of Syrians in the United States), vicarious contact can also be an effective and ecologically valid intervention for reducing intergroup anxiety and prejudice to prepare people for actual contact.

This study provides preliminary evidence for a simple yet successful intervention; however, this raises many questions for future research in this area—mostly into unpacking the underlying mechanisms for the reduction in intergroup anxiety. One possibility could be that reading a story about Syrian refugees may have enhanced the knowledge of the participants about the outgroup, which is a well-known mediator for the contact-prejudice link (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In the face of no actual contact, participants can use this vicariously attained information to update their negative stereotypes about Syrian refugees promoted by the populist media and political discourse. In this way, this new information might then reduce participants' concerns and anxiety about engaging in an interaction with them. Moreover, Syrian refugees are always presented as a homogenous group who are fleeing war, seeking refuge, but also are dangerous and pose a security threat and economic burden to the receiving countries. This might result in them being dehumanized, which has detrimental consequences for intergroup relations (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). Indeed, a recent study found that blatant dehumanization of Muslim refugees in Europe is prevalent, and it is strongly related to anti-refugee attitudes (Bruneau, Kteily, & Laustsen, 2018) with similar findings to the previous works (e.g., Esses, Veenvliet, & Medianu, 2013). Reading a story that depicts refugees as individuals and presents their daily lives might efficiently reduce dehumanization of refugees, and in turn reduced dehumanization might be an important mechanism through which vicarious contact can exert its effects. Finally, story-reading interventions are effective at generalizing the positive attitude change toward the entire group because the reader as an outside observer does not differentiate the individuating features of the outgroup member (Hewstone & Brown, 1986).

significantly related to any variables (all $ps > .05$); hence we concluded that collecting data twice in two different time points did not affect our findings).

There are a few other future avenues this study inspires for further research. Currently, this study only provides evidence for reduced prejudice just after the intervention; however, it is important to test the longevity of the effect. Indeed, Pettigrew and Hewstone (2017) suggest that extended/vicarious contact may prepare people for real-life encounters. Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, and Woods (2010) provide some longitudinal evidence for this whereby they found extended prior contact before college was related to cross-group friends at college.

We are also cautious to interpret our findings in the light of recent evidence for a caveat in the contact-prejudice link. Kende and colleagues (2017) recently reconducted the meta-analysis of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) by adding cultural level variables. Although they replicated the findings that contact predicted weaker prejudice in most countries, this effect depended on the extent to which a culture was egalitarian or hierarchical. Specifically, contact predicted low prejudice more strongly in egalitarian cultural contexts, whereas this link was weaker in hierarchical cultures. Moreover, in hierarchical cultures, equally structured contact predicted less prejudice more strongly than contact that was not equally structured. Therefore, cultural context should be considered appropriately when designing such interventions.

Finally, this study used an empty control condition where participants responded to the outcome variables without reading something comparable to the experimental condition. One might argue that the present effect might derive from reading a story about a struggling family rather than having a vicarious contact with a Syrian family. Although this does not undermine the positive effect of the manipulation and the relevant findings, future research should ask participants to read a comparable story about a non-Syrian family to circumvent such limitations.

General Discussion

In this paper, we documented the antecedents of social distance toward Syrian refugees, how perceptions of acculturation orientations are related to social distance, and then explored vicarious contact as an avenue for intervention to reduce social distance. We have discussed certain limitations of each study and avenues for future research, and we now discuss the overall implications of our findings.

First, we demonstrated the predictors of social distance, and how perceived acculturation orientation affects social distance toward Syrians by United States citizens. Based on the finding that perceived assimilation led to less social distance than perceived integration, it will be important for further research to explore how to pose the benefits of multiculturalism and diversity to majority group members (Scott & Safdar, 2017; Verkuyten, 2005; Ward, Gale, Staerklé, & Stuart, 2018). In any pluralistic society, and maybe more so in those unexpectedly receiving refugee-diaspora, group-based differences are inevitable. Thus while assimilation might be preferred by the majority in the United States and in increasing

number of EU countries, it is perhaps both nonfeasible and nonbeneficial for the minority. Alternatives could focus on promoting tolerance of points of difference and celebrating the positive outcomes that intergroup contact is known to deliver. This could then help educate majority populations about the benefits of diversity and multiculturalism both for the minority and the majority rather than expecting refugees to be able to immediately become “American.”

Second, we provided evidence that an ecologically valid social media-based story reading intervention reduces social distance toward Syrian refugees by decreasing intergroup anxiety. Although more research is needed to disentangle the necessary conditions to induce effective vicarious contact effects (as discussed earlier in the respective discussion section), we believe these are promising preliminary findings for promoting positive social change and informing effective policymaking. For example, Pettigrew and Hewstone (2017) suggest that extended contact can function to help prepare individuals for direct contact. Wölfer et al. (2016) also found that indirect contact has positive longitudinal effects on direct contact. We believe reduced anxiety, as one of the major mediators of intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), can be a focal point for interventions to improve intergroup attitudes toward Syrian refugees. Social psychologists have an increasing knowledge base of how to maximize these effects and yet are still struggling to form credible interventions for prejudice that have the potential to induce lasting societal changes (Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2017). The implications of this simple yet effective intervention demonstrated in the current research are very promising. Incorporating such stories in the curriculum as educational materials or in storybooks may help reduce social distance for children and young adults, which has the potential to reduce social distance at the individual and societal level. Similar vicarious contact interventions could be easily used in pop culture by introducing characters with a migrant/refugee background to fiction-based mediums or presenting Syrian diaspora in nonfiction traditional media. The positive impact of these contact interventions should be measured and evaluated so that it could be used to inform policy making with the potential benefits for refugee mental health and positive societal relationships, while possibilities for negative contact should be monitored and prevented (Kotzur, Tropp, & Wagner, 2018).

One overall limitation of this package of studies was the chosen dependent variable. Here, we focused on an interactional aspect of prejudice: a self-report measure of social distance. Recently, Lazarev and Sharma (2017) conducted a study in Turkey measuring the effect of shared religious identity on reducing outgroup attitudes toward Syrians, and they found different effects for different outcome measures such as acceptance of Syrians, support for the government’s spending, intergroup trust, and donation. Therefore, it is important to vary the outgroup measures and especially include behavioral measures like making donations for this group. Moreover, although we focused on acculturation orientations

in Study 2, we failed to include this measure in Study 3 and was not able to test whether vicarious contact would also alter receiving country members' preferred acculturation orientation for Syrian refugees and hence their social distance toward them. As intergroup contact may sometimes be a facilitative factor of acculturation processes (Sam & Barry, 2010), perhaps presentation of Syrians' preferred integration orientation with their own personalized stories might help receiving country members to appreciate the importance of the cultural maintenance for integration. Future research should investigate this possibility.

To conclude, UNHCR's refugee integration report (2013) states that social integration of refugees is not a one-way street, and both refugees and the receiving community need to make efforts. For this, we suggest that it is important to represent refugees as individuals rather than a homogenous group. The more people perceive them as individuals with their own personal stories, the more likely for them to critically evaluate negative representations and information about them, which might in turn reduce the perceptions of threat. Moreover, it is important to take into account both the majority and minority's perspectives on acculturation, and provide accurate information about the benefits of integration and multiculturalism. For example, in a society where the nationals want refugees to assimilate, whereas refugees try to integrate (still holding onto their heritage culture), this discrepancy might perpetuate intergroup conflict by putting refugees in a vulnerable position and making them susceptible to rejection by the nationals (see Brown & Zagefka, 2011). However, institutional support could be used to promote the importance of integration and support for multiculturalism (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Brown & Zagefka, 2011; Huo, Dovidio, Jiménez, & Schidkraut, 2018). This could involve campaigns aimed at changing negative stereotypes about refugees using stories such as those used as in Study 3. In this way, common metaphors used to refer to refugees that activate disgust and predict stricter immigration policies (e.g., Marshall & Shapiro, 2018) could be replaced by positive stories about individuals and their lives. Moreover, proposing welcoming policies regarding refugees (e.g., Huo et al., 2018) and framing refugees and immigrants as indispensable for the society (e.g., Espinosa et al., 2018) might help prepare people for intergroup contact and eventually reinforce multicultural norms in society, which would eventually diminish majority's resistance to multiculturalism (Ward et al., 2018). We believe vicarious contact could be a first step for both groups to prepare them for actual contact and positive intergroup relations.

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